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## THE ELECTIVE SYSTEM IN PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS

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The contemporary discussion concerning the elective system for public high schools suggests the exhortation of a negro cab-driver. Glad of the lightning which showed him the road, but terrified by repeated peals of thunder, he cried: "O, Lord, if it's all the same to you, send us more light and less noise." It is only with the hope of revealing some light on this problem that one is warranted in making more noise.

Whether free choice should begin in the first year of the public high-school course is a question concerning which there has been much writing, some thinking, and a little scientific investigation. Many individual opinions have been given; the arguments on each side have been partly stated, some evidence has been presented, usually without consideration of its full bearing on all phases of the question; but has anyone sought to discover the truth through bringing together all the arguments on both sides and viewing them in the light of facts? I have found no such attempt. My present purpose is to make that attempt, first of all through reducing the arguments of both sides to their lowest terms, in order to see in brief compass just what are the vital differences of opinion; and, second, through considering those issues one by one in connection with the investigations I have made concerning the working of the elective system in the United States.

First, then, what is said against the elective system for public high schools. The arguments may be considered conveniently in four main divisions: the first concerning the ability of high-school pupils to choose; the second concerning possible compromises between complete election and complete prescription; the third concerning the effect of each system on teachers and principals; the fourth concerning the relative moral worth of the old system of prescription and the new system of election.

The first of these arguments contends that those in charge of the schools can choose better for all than can each individual pupil for himself. This is held to be true for three reasons: (*a*) there are certain studies which are essential for all pupils, of which Latin, algebra, geometry, and English are often urged; (*b*) pupils will not of their own choice elect these necessary studies; (*c*) pupils will choose foolishly, for they will elect easy courses, or those for which they are not prepared, or those taught by favorite teachers, or those of little value, or disconnected courses.

As a second main argument, two compromises are proposed, either of which is held to be superior to the elective system in its entirety. Since there are certain studies which constitute an essential foundation, and since pupils, left to their own choice, will neglect these studies, a program of partial prescription or a group system seems to many people far better than "a frolic of unbridled fancy." Such is the name applied to the elective idea by an extreme opponent who refuses to call it a "system."

Of those who favor partial prescription, some would have the greater part of school work required and allow the pupil to choose only the "fringe." Others would establish a system of restricted choice, requiring the pupil to take at least one study from each of the great divisions of human knowledge—say language, history, mathematics, and science. The other suggested compromise, called the group system, offers several complete programs of studies, one of which the pupil must elect; but the studies within each group are wholly prescribed. The argument in favor of this system is that each pupil, whether preparing for college, for technical school, or for business—whether wishing a classical, scientific, or commercial course—can elect one well-planned group of related studies. Many believe that thus the benefits of the elective system are secured and its evils eliminated.

A third argument opposed to the elective system concerns teachers and principals. It is held that this system requires abler, more enthusiastic teachers, more competent and sympathetic principals, stronger men and women; that, further, the system demands of them more work. On this point, other friends of prescribed study urge that the free-choice system is a device to evade the most difficult

work of teaching, a lazy, *laissez-faire* policy; for it tends to relieve teachers of the very pupils whom they have most difficulty in forcing through a prescribed curriculum.

A fourth main argument is that the prescribed system is of greater moral worth. "What a boy likes," it is said, "is not always best for him," and "backwardness in any subject shows the desirability of more training at just that point." The drudgery of enforced tasks and the discipline in conquering distasteful subjects is more valuable than any training in free choice, and only prescribed work cultivates habits of application, thoroughness, and accuracy.

These four objections do not by any means comprise all that has been said against the elective system. The arguments have been too intricate and numerous, have wandered along too many divergent paths to be gathered into four folds. The friends of the fixed curriculum have also urged (1) that most public high schools are too limited in resources—in teachers and equipment—to make possible a program of free choice; (2) that there are dangers of superficiality in the so-called "enriching" and "broadening" of lower-school programs; (3) that absolutely unrestricted choice is impossible, since there are so many hindrances to its free play; (4) that the elective system throws upon busy parents an added responsibility, one wholly assumed by school authorities under the old fixed plan; (5) that the elective system cannot put a stop to all educational wastes.

Indeed, so many have been the invectives against the elective system, so diverse have been the attacks, that it is no simple matter to extricate the specific objections. As far as I know, however, all the arguments which have been advanced seriously are now before us in five divisions. The necessity of such an arbitrary arrangement, and the reason why I have grouped the last six contentions in a fifth division, will become clear through an examination of the other side—of the arguments which favor complete freedom of choice in all our public high schools.

The arguments adduced in support of the elective system may be considered in six groups, the first four of which will be seen to correspond with the first four opposing arguments stated above: (1) those concerning the relative ability of the individual to choose for

himself and the ability of the school authorities to choose for all; (2) concerning the proposed substitutes for complete election; (3) concerning the effect of each system on teachers and principals; (4) concerning the relative moral worth of the two systems; (5) concerning the interest of pupils in their work; (6) concerning several particular needs of public high-school education in the United States.

The first argument in this order is that throughout the United States each high-school pupil is better able to choose for himself than are school authorities for all alike. This is held true for three reasons: (*a*) there are no studies which are essential for all pupils; (*b*) few students omit the subjects most commonly defended by advocates of fixed courses; (*c*) there are many natural safeguards which together inhibit most of the mistakes of choice feared by the opponents of the elective system.

The second argument holds that no other plan is so satisfactory as complete election. The group system (when its only distinct feature is preserved) is too rigid to provide for individual needs, and is an attempt to *enforce* specialization. Nor is any system of partial choice so satisfactory as complete election. A few options will not give the necessary advantages. Furthermore, elective and prescribed work side by side are incompatible. Finally, a partially elective plan will not do, for free choice should be given in the first year of high school, that the opportunities may attract grammar-school graduates who are deciding whether to enter the high school; free choice should come at this time, when the inevitable errors of training in choice are least harmful.

A third argument is that, under the elective system, teachers and principals are relieved of the most disheartening kind of work, and inspired with a more sympathetic and enthusiastic attitude toward their work and their pupils.

A fourth is the moral argument. The elective principle is considered strongest for building character, because it honors the will, trains in choice, removes the dangers of habitual dependence, decreases the amount of cheating, helps to break the demoralizing educational "lock-step," and aids in developing good citizens. Furthermore, in reply to a common objection, the friends of election say that there are two kinds of drudgery, and the only kind which has moral strength

is as surely found where all studies are elective as where all are prescribed.

Closely related to the question of moral worth is a fifth point: the elective system arouses the interest, willingness, and enthusiasm of pupils, as no other system can, whereas prescription makes many pupils disparage the very studies which it seeks to dignify.

A sixth group of arguments in favor of the new system deals with several present needs of public high schools in the United States, which, it is held, only the elective system can satisfy. One of these is the need of arousing the interest of parents, and thus securing more sympathetic co-operation of home and school. Another is the need of a system by which our school buildings can be used more hours of each day, and thus be made to accommodate more pupils. A third is the necessity in a democratic community of recognizing the wide diversity in the needs of pupils, and thus providing for all classes of society. A fourth is the need of increasing the percentage of the population that secures a high-school education, both by attracting more pupils and by keeping them longer in school. Such present demands, which the people rightfully make of their schools, no prescribed curricula can so nearly satisfy as the plan of complete free choice.

Here, then, are the arguments of both sides, stripped of all their finery and set side by side for the sake of comparison. It is clear that the two sides meet with a definite clash on the first four issues.

The questions, therefore, which must be decided, the issues on which the advocates of the new system must win or lose their case, are these four: (1) Whether each pupil can choose better for himself or school authorities for all; this in turn depends on (*a*) whether there is a common ground essential for all pupils; (*b*) whether with freedom of choice pupils will avoid this common ground; (*c*) whether there are a sufficient number of safeguards to prevent unwise choices. (2) Whether the group system or any system of partial election has sufficient advantages to offset those of the elective system. (3) Which plan is better suited to secure the interest, sympathy, effective work, and happiness of teachers and principals. (4) Whether the moral benefits of drudgery, of conquering distasteful subjects, of submitting to authority, acquiring habits of persistence and accuracy,

which are claimed for the prescribed system, outweigh the moral worth of training in free choice which is claimed for the elective system. Such are the four main issues.

Above and beyond these, on which the two sides clinch, other arguments are advanced on both sides of the question. What is their bearing? If they are beside the point, we can discard them at once; if they are germane, but incontestable, we must keep them in mind as truths to be reckoned with; but in any event, since they have all been brought forward repeatedly in connection with this subject, we must give them fair consideration. We may well do so before we examine the main issues.

In an overlapping group we included the objection that the majority of public high schools are too limited in teaching force and equipment to introduce elective studies; and another objection—the danger of superficiality in the so-called enriching and broadening of lower-school programs. These two matters are continually and often evasively slipped in among the arguments against elective studies; but if this bare, perhaps wearisome, analysis of the question serves any purpose, it helps to make clear that these two points are not germane, but beyond the limits of the present subject.

They are extraneous, because, as regards the first objection, it is obvious that schools which can offer only one complete course are not concerned with the matter of election; such schools fall beyond the scope of this discussion until they are able to extend their curricula. Likewise, concerning the second objection, however important it may be to recognize the possible dangers in enriching and broadening the programs of the lower schools, the question does not concern the *election* of studies. This point is important. If there are any subjects which are worthless, out of place, or superficially taught, they are so whether they are imposed on the pupil or left to his choice. The real fault is that they are in the curriculum at all. These two matters, therefore, may be safely banished from the real issues.

The arguments against the elective system further include two contentions: first, that unrestricted election is impossible, since there are so many hindrances to its free play; second, that the elective system throws on busy parents a responsibility hitherto wholly assumed

by the schools. Surely these two points concern us vitally; but, so far as I know, they are admitted by everybody. So much is common ground. The last objection mentioned above—a kind always urged against any reform, namely, that the new system will not put a stop to all educational wastes—is conceded by all its defenders.

There remain, beyond the clash of opinion on this question, the two additional arguments already outlined in favor of the elective principle; namely, that it arouses the interest of pupils as no other system can, and that it responds more effectively than any other plan to several important needs of modern public schools.

In thus defining the question and ruthlessly narrowing the issues, as I have done in a somewhat arbitrary way, and in seeking a clear path among opinions, assertions, and generalities more or less connected with the subject, I have found considerable drudgery and many a lesson in patience; advantages, by the way, which, some people contend, go only with enforced work. On some aspects of this matter only opinions can be given; on others, sound reasoning; on still others, the results of scientific investigation. Such results are most valuable, for, in dealing with questions concerning which the organization of contemporary educational experience gives facts, it is an old and pernicious habit to guide practice by mere individual opinion. On such questions your opinion is as good as mine, mine is as good as yours, and the chances are that neither is worth much. Consequently, wherever I have found it possible to collect specific evidence on any phase of the subject at hand, I have done so, with the result that my own attitude toward the question has passed from doubt—a good old-fashioned doubt—to the conviction that in all the public high schools of the country the studies should be wholly elective.

Whatever differences of opinion there may be concerning the value of the elective system, no one can deny that its progress—like that of reform everywhere—has been slow and painful. At every turn it has met a stone wall of conservatism. For one educated under the old prescribed régime, and indoctrinated with the venerable idea of what constitutes a liberal education, it is difficult to eliminate the personal equation. Scholars cling naturally to old ideas, old ideals,



old methods; no body of men is more stolid, more averse to change. In business such men fail, driven to the wall by competition with those who are ready to adopt new methods. But education fosters conservatism; as a rule, men prefer to teach the things they were taught, and to teach them in the same way. So the mistakes of fathers are visited upon children and upon children's children, unto how many generations only the history of education can tell.

Just at this point the reply is made that in all ages conservative forces have been valuable safeguards to progress. True, conservatism often means needed restraint; it curbs and tempers the ultra-radical. In education, however, conservatism has oftener meant stagnation—a fact so conspicuous that not even the most ardent opponents of the elective system venture to deny it. Nearly every progressive step has been made against violent, prolonged, and often vicious opposition. For hundreds of years schoolmasters kept their backs to the future, and vainly endeavored to ignore the crying demands of the present. We congratulate ourselves that we have now turned about; that with every effort to think clearly and independently we are feeling the pulse of present need and striving even for glimpses of the future. Shall we not, then, in all fairness to the friends of the new, as well as to ourselves, endeavor to look on this question without prejudice?

The elective principle can be justified in the first consideration only by proving that each pupil is better able to choose for himself alone—not for any other pupil or for the fictitious “average boy,” but for himself alone—than is any individual, however wise, or any body of men, however experienced, to choose for all pupils. This proposition is fundamental. To it the advocates of prescribed studies reply that certain studies should be required of all. At the risk of wearisome repetition, I reduce their argument, for the sake of clearness, to this syllogism:

First, there are certain studies essential for all pupils in public high schools.

Second, students left to their own choice will not elect those studies.

Conclusion: therefore those studies should be prescribed.

If either premise is false, the conclusion does not follow.

First, then, is it true that there are studies which should be required of all pupils in public high schools? Are we sure that any subjects naturally belonging to high-school years should be forced on all pupils, boys and girls, rich and poor, weak and strong, bright and dull, regardless of their aims, aptitudes, desires, ambitions, temperaments, capacities? It seems at least doubtful. In these important respects no two individuals are alike. We need no master of psychology, no profound student of education, to tell us that each high-school pupil is an infinitely complex organization, the duplicate of which does not and never will exist. By heredity and by environment he differs widely from all other human beings in passions, adaptabilities, emotions, desires, powers, health. In no other creature are they associated as they are in him. His will-force, enthusiasm, interest, moral purposes are aroused and used in ways wholly his own. In the rate of physical development, in bodily endurance, in home influences, in time of entering school, in regularity of attendance, in future possibilities—one could stretch out this enumeration to the crack of doom, for in an endless number of particulars each individual is unlike all the others in any school. What then, shall we attempt to cast this mind into one mold with all others, and subject it to the same treatment, the same work, the same tests, the same influences for the same length of time? Shall we, in prescribing for our own children, neglect the universal principle of endless diversity, and plan our public high-school programs for a purely imaginative child—the “genus homo,” the “average high-school pupil”—who never did and never can exist? If so, we must inevitably neglect all the species, all the living potentialities, all the vastly dissimilar individuals who knock at the doors of public high schools in a democratic community.

*[To be continued]*